FUTUREHIT.DNA

How the digital revolution is changing Top 10 songs

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IMPACT THE LISTENER IN THE FIRST SEVEN SECONDS

You are listening to a song on the radio. The song begins and the DJ is spouting meaningless banter until the vocalist begins singing. You "hear" the song, but in actuality, the DJ is guiding you to the new "beginning" of the song when the singer utters the first note. This is usually fifteen or twenty seconds into the song itself, which sugarcoats the song to the degree that the listener will have heard about thirty seconds before he decides whether he likes it or not. This thirty seconds is not inconsequential, as it is nearly 15% of a 3 1/2 minute song.

When you are dealing with a song that you have already heard, this does not have perceived impact. Most people are already aware of their enjoyment of the song or lack thereof. No amount of enticement from the DJ will affect whether you will tune out.

The real impact of the DJ's "post" of a new song is the familiarity that it can breed over time. Even if the listener

does not enjoy the song at that moment, he has heard enough of it to likely respond positively on subsequent plays. As a listener, even if you tune out of the new unfamiliar tune, you have actually allowed 15% of the song to seep into your consciousness. Over time, that will bring familiarity with the song.

This is not the only way that the listening habits of radio cause you to become familiar with songs that were heretofore unknown. With digital radios the norm, flipping through stations full of undesired programming has become an extremely common practice. This then leads to listeners encountering songs already in progress. This can be a few seconds into the song, in the middle, or perhaps the end. No matter where the listener comes in, the chances he will hear a song in a position other than the beginning is very high.

Once again, this holds little consequence to an audience already familiar with a song. Most classic songs have been ingrained so deeply into the audience that any random five-second snippet is likely to elicit familiarity. If this familiarity causes a positive response, the listener will stay with it. If it does not, they are unlikely to change their opinion and stick with the song.

With unfamiliar songs, the reaction can be very different. If the listener hears the middle of the song as his first impression, he is likely to tune out. But that impression is setting up vague familiarity for any subsequent listen. Eventually, through a combination of these “in the middle” impressions, and the impressions over the DJ post (where the listener gets exposed to 15% of the song), the listener will develop familiarity without even realizing it. This can often be achieved over the course of four to seven impressions.

When the listener reaches this point, it is likely he has not actually heard the song in its entirety. However, through the repetitive nature of these impressions, the listener believes he has heard the entire song and feels familiarity. Now, the listener develops his opinion of how much he enjoys the song.

This entire process, while oddly convoluted and difficult to feel in action, is actually very healthy for the music discovery process. Listeners rarely express a desire for new music. In fact, if asked explicitly if they would like new music, most people would not respond favorably. They appreciate it when solid new music "arrives," but that arrival is usually a result of the above process.

Added to the process are the filtering mechanisms employed by radio stations and record labels to limit the amount of new music that actually reaches those ears. Presume for a minute that the average listener has six presets on his radio, all programmed to stations that play new music. (With the proliferation of talk radio and oldies-based formats such as "JACK-FM," this is becoming a less likely scenario.) Each new station "adds," or begins to play, two or three new songs in a given week. With six presets, this would mean the listener has a total maximum pool of eighteen new songs to discover weekly. If you subtract likely duplicates (a new song by a crossover A-list artist is likely to receive airplay on multiple stations), and new songs that get only "overnight" spins, this number will rarely exceed half the pool. So most radio listeners will only have a *chance* of being exposed to nine or ten new songs a week. Since people do other things besides listening to radio, they will usually get exposed to far fewer songs. In today's world, exposure to two or more songs is considered a success. With this very complicated and drawn out process to get new music out to listeners, it becomes clear why it is difficult for people to hear it.

THE DIGITAL REVOLUTION HAS MADE MUSIC DISCOVERY HARDER

The above statement certainly seems counterintuitive. The digital age was *supposed* to make this whole process easier. People were *supposed* to find the songs they want far more quickly than ever. The elimination of radio and record company filters was *supposed* to make the world a fairer

place for people to hear songs and make them popular. What happened?

The digital age has made it infinitely easier for people to find, obtain, and experience music with which they are *already* familiar. This familiarity can come from having heard the song previously, or from the knowledge that the song exists. If the listener already knows he is going to enjoy a song, he can easily find it and experience it as much as possible. Since he is already familiar with the song, the choices have mostly been made prior to listening to it. He is either committed to the song or he is not.

For new songs, the proposition is much more dicey. For one, the elimination of filters makes it very difficult for listeners to become familiar with any new songs with regularity. On any given week, between 10,000 and 15,000 songs are introduced through legal digital channels. If you filter out genres that most listeners are unlikely to search through (such as world music and jazz), as well as older songs making their online legal debut, you are still left with several thousand new songs that can presumably be heard for the first time each week. Even with filtering, the universe of new songs is as much as 2,000 times greater than that which had been previously experienced on traditional radio stations.

As radio listenership decreases, the reliance of radio for new music exposure also decreases significantly. As the active music listener gets immersed in the digital age, his primary exposure to new music comes in a variety of ways:

- iPod or other portable digital music player.
- On-demand airplay online.
- Online music video outlets.
- Online radio.
- Mobile music applications.

The majority of these experiences bring with them a certain amount of knowledge about the song. Portable device plays require the user to actively download, purchase, or willingly receive the song, so he must have a prior

knowledge of that song. On-demand airplay requires the listener to actively know about that song, and to be looking for it. Same thing for nearly all online music video outlets.

There are some instances where a prior knowledge of the artist is not required, and can result in "pushed" exposure to these new artists. Online radio actually offers a large degree of randomness, as designed by the creators of that station. When you tune in, you will be pushed to a song of their choosing, as well as every song thereafter. You can also get on-demand plays from individual websites when songs start playing as soon as you load the page. While the user has no control over the music (save for muting the song), he does have control over which website he visits, which sometimes has a connection to the music that plays. Social networking sites such as myspace and Facebook also allow opportunities for users to play music upon arrival to an individual's page.

ZERO PLAYS

Throughout all of this, the most common feature of each song's airplay is not the method in which it is distributed. It is not even predicated on whether the airplay is pushed out to the listener, or pulled in from the listener's prior knowledge. All of these things are responsible for getting the song to the user in the first place, but they are not what aids garnering that song a second listen. If you wish a song to be a hit, the second impression is more important than the first. In fact, as stated above, it's really the fifth, sixth, or seventh impression that truly matters.

While online methods have allowed much greater access to a wider selection of new music, this has not changed the major precept of most music listeners. They do not want to hear new music. The subtlety, or lack thereof, that radio employs to expose new music only exists elsewhere in rare circumstances. In most cases, you get one shot at impressing someone with a song. With a wide choice of new music to

experience, the listener does not want to waste time on songs that have little to no chance of being enjoyed in the future.

If the listener needs to be snagged from the very first listen, an artist needs to find the most common elements among all music distribution. That allows the listener to get the song, no matter what the situation. This means replicating the experience on everything from an iPod to a personal website, and from major music portals to underground, illegal sites. When you consider all of these experiences both today and in the near future, one common element exists in the overwhelming majority of music plays: The song will start at zero seconds.

To nearly any music listener, this seems obvious and intuitive. This likely also appears banal and so insipid that it should not even merit a mention. All songs start at zero seconds. Everyone always starts listening to the song at the beginning of the song. When people go to a concert, they usually start cheering at the opening chord of a song that they know they are going to love. All of the songs on the CDs a person listens to also start at zero seconds.

But the common thread on all of these zero plays is that they largely occur on songs with which the listener is already familiar. Active music fans may listen to unfamiliar songs rabidly, but the passive consumer who bought a CD for a few hit songs will likely hit the skip button on unfamiliar songs far more often. Over time, the listener might get to enjoy some of these unfamiliar songs. Even then, it is usually initiated passively: The album is played in the background often enough for the unfamiliar to become familiar.

The notion of most songs creating familiarity outside of the zero-second start time has not been widely discussed and theorized. In the timeline of music history, “non-zero” familiarity exposure was barely in its infancy before it began to go away with the rise of the digital age. Historically, songs closest in style to today’s modern pop song were mostly played in campfire, choral, or minstrel settings, when

the lack of technology prevented music from being widely disseminated and songs were handed down or taught. It is highly unlikely that someone began teaching a song in its middle.

When technology first took hold at the turn of the twentieth century, and recorded music appeared on either single-song cylinders or piano rolls, the mechanics were too cumbersome to suggest that anything but a minute portion of plays began outside of the opening notes. When 78s (and later 45s) came out, single play was also the order of the day, so it was doubtful anyone would jump into the middle of the song unless they already had a high degree of familiarity.

Radio, as it first developed, focused on live broadcasts. The idea of "disc jockeys" did not exist yet. So while there were certainly instances of music being heard with a non-zero play start, most people heard music from listening to scheduled programming. That meant they listened to music from the beginning nearly every time.

The 1950s were likely the first instance where listeners got exposed to a significant amount of music through non-zero airplay. Radio became a world governed by disc jockeys. There was little drama programming, only non-stop music. People would tune in at odd times instead of scheduled ones, which certainly resulted in many non-zero exposures. This exposure, however, was minimal. There were usually very few choices for a music listener on the radio, mostly because there was only an AM band, not AM + FM like today, and there were not necessarily as many stations broadcasting in a given market as in later years. So channel-switching seldom occurred. Similarly, there was no "memory" of favorite stations on the radios, making it difficult for listeners to switch between stations efficiently. As a result, true non-zero effectiveness for new music exposure did not occur on a mass scale until the mid-to-late 1960s with the advent of FM radio, a wider variety of choices, and the initial designs of radios with programmed memory.

That same decade also brought the first mass iterations of the Long Playing record, or "LP," into pop music. Initially, the LP was little more than singles strung together for easy purchase, or the primary format for genres such as classical, jazz or show tunes. In most cases, there was a degree of familiarity that went into purchasing these releases. Since familiarity was key to purchasing the discs, most LPs of popular music featured the famous "hit" single as the first song on the record. This virtually guaranteed that most initial impressions of the album were from the music the listener already knew. It would take until the mid-to-late 1960s for mass ownership of record players that could play LPs. It was then, too, that artists began challenging the structure of the album, and created records that had familiar "hits" embedded deep within the LP, if at all.

Those who grew up with vinyl records have probably grasped how this progression of LPs helped create familiarity of songs through non-zero airplay. In order to access songs not in progression on the album, you would need to physically lift up the needle and place it on the track you wished to play. If you were to play a song exactly at the beginning, you would need to precisely hit the "groove" etched into the record. In most cases, the listener would get the end of the previous song, be placed many seconds into the desired song, or hear some other song entirely, depending on the steadiness of his hand. In other words, he would get non-zero initial exposures to unfamiliar songs all the time. This only increased as albums progressively moved away from hits placed in the opening slot.

HIT SONG INTROS

With so many technological changes in the mid-1960s, the transition then began from listeners becoming familiar with music from non-zero exposure instead of mostly zero plays. This only increased through the modern music era. By looking at the average length of the introductions of #1

songs by year, one can see how this technology shift drastically changed the introductions of popular music.

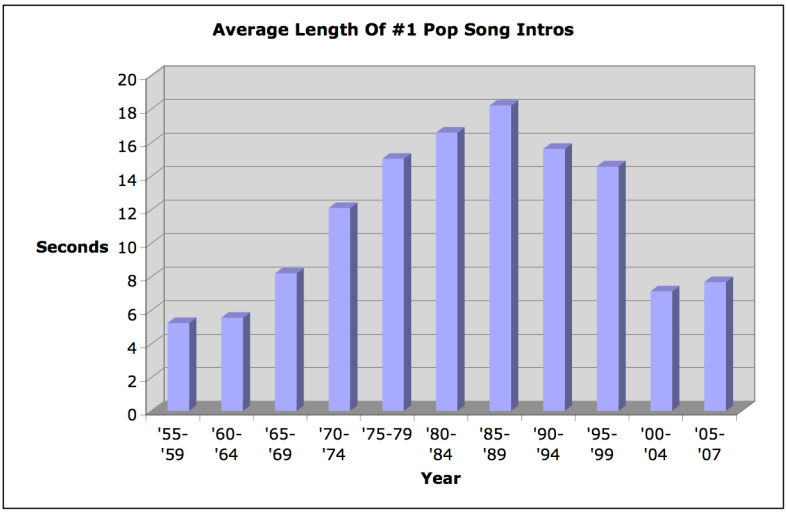

CHART SOURCE: *BILLBOARD/JOEL WHITBURN'S TOP POP SINGLES 1955-2006*

Throughout, some artists created songs purely from their artistic impulses. Others wrote songs to fit radio's criteria in the hopes of making them popular. The trending of song intros shows there was an increase in the length of introductions in popular music as the likelihood of more non-zero music exposures also increased.

The peak of the length of song introductions occurred in the 1980s, when the average #1 song had an intro of 17.4 seconds. This coincides neatly with the rise of the cassette. Where an LP gave the listener a visual groove to attempt to start the song at a correct location, a cassette offered no such luxury. It was even more difficult for the listener to discern where a particular song began or ended to find it efficiently. The estimates listeners employed to find the songs they desired came from their own knowledge of approximate song lengths, divided by their estimates of the speed of the fast-forward and rewind buttons. In other words, they

guessed. Naturally, this exponentially increased the number of non-zero plays that existed for people to hear new music.

The 1980s also saw the transition from the analog "memory" of radio stations on car stereos to digital memory. This allowed listeners to effectively switch rapidly between radio stations to find only the songs that interested them. This dramatically increased the amount of non-zero new music exposure. Adding to the likelihood of an increase in station "flipping" was a marked increase in the number of stations playing music that appealed to a wider audience. While FM radio had a significant rise in usage in the 1970s, it was the beginning of the 1980s when both AM and FM became standard on nearly all radios. These changes increased the likelihood that the listener could switch to an appealing choice of music.

The other advent of the 1980s was MTV, which played short-form music video clips nearly every hour of every day. MTV played these clips much like a radio station did, offering a variety of songs book ended by DJs (or VJs) and advertisements. When it was new and fresh in the first half of the 1980s, viewers stayed tuned in for hours on end. Over time, when the novelty began to wane, viewership changed dramatically. In a successful effort to increase ratings and advertising, MTV began the transition to thirty-minute shows, as research and Nielsen reports showed that people tuned in and out often in a fifteen-minute stretch of videos. If they were tuning out that rapidly (presumably because they did not like the video being offered), they would be just as likely to tune back in rapidly when the unpopular video ended. Much like cassettes, users would rely on guesswork as to when that video would be completed. This would certainly result in a large amount of non-zero airplay, either of the song they disliked in the first place (possibly due to unfamiliarity, which could then lead this non-zero airplay to familiarity), or arriving in the middle of a subsequent video. Competition through the 1990s from other channels such as BET and The Box (along with some successful shows such

as “Friday Night Videos”) only increased the likelihood of channel flipping and non-zero airplay.

None of that should necessarily increase the length of a song intro, but it did. As these non-zero plays increased dramatically, the relevance of the introduction of a song ceased to exist. If many people were enjoying songs in this fashion, then an introduction to a song had little or no bearing on a song’s eventual success in the marketplace. Also during this timeframe, callout research – in which a radio station hired a firm to call listeners to ask if they liked a particular song—became refined enough for radio station programmers to use regularly. Since these firms would not have the time in a telephone survey to play someone an entire song, they employed nine to twelve second sections of the song, most often called the “hook.” This hook was so crucial that the results of the research could change dramatically, depending on which portion of a song was used. Very seldom was the song intro considered vital enough to be the “hook.” In nearly all cases, it was the chorus.

An interesting example of how a song’s hook can be spotlighted due to non-zero airplay is in the 1982 Adam Ant hit, “Goody Two Shoes.” In this song, the chorus, with the refrain “Don’t drink, don’t smoke, what do you do?” is repeated incessantly. In fact, it is repeated so often that it takes up 1:08 of a 3:28 song, or nearly 33% of the total running time. In a non-zero environment, this would mean that the listener had a one in three chance of tuning into the “hook,” resulting in the development of familiarity. Also, the song has an excessively long introduction, clocking in at thirty-four seconds. As previously noted, a DJ often talked over song introductions, effectively delaying the conscious starting point until the completion of the introduction. If we deduct that intro, the listener actually has a 39% chance of hearing the song’s hook, a nearly 20% increase.

The same song in a zero play environment would have a dramatically different effect. For a listener to become

familiar with the song, he would first sit through twelve seconds of a relatively generic tribal drumbeat with some acoustic guitar. Then, he would have to patiently wait through an additional twenty-two seconds of instrumental introduction before getting to the first vocals. With these hurdles, the likelihood this song would be a hit in the digital age is extremely slim.

SELECTOR AND INTROS

The length of introductions in the 1990s can theoretically be traced to the necessity of disc jockey banter to include advertising messages. Many listeners have correctly picked up on the dramatic increase in commercials on radio during this time, commonly referred to as "spot load." This was a result of industry consolidation into public companies, and squeezing out more revenue to swell the bottom line. One way that was not so obvious to most listeners was to insert ads into the DJ's talking points before a song began. In order to do this effectively, the DJ needed songs with introductions long enough to get an advertising message across. This resulted in songs with longer introductions getting played more often. These songs would also get played with a DJ introduction, which then would lead to more familiarity as the DJ guided the listener into the song.

But to be fair, radio broadcasters did not program a song just because of its advertising potential. However, the most significant tool in radio programming in the 1990s did this dirty work for them, and the programmer was completely oblivious to the process. How were songs with longer intros programmed without the knowledge of the people in charge? The idea seems preposterous. However, the culprit that made it all happen were computer-scheduling programs, the most common one called "Selector."

What "Selector" does is allow a computer to take a pre-selected list of songs for a particular station, merge them with various criteria assigned to the song, and then spit out a

second-by-second playlist of the songs the DJ is supposed to play in that timeframe. No ballads played back-to-back? No problem. At least sixty minutes between songs featuring a particular artist? Easy. Play songs with a specific minimum introduction length at specific points of the day? Done.

So follow this progression of a song with a longer introduction as it gains a competitive edge to becoming a hit. The radio programmer picks all of the songs he wishes to play in a given week. He then decides the approximate range of the number of plays, or spins, that song would receive in that given week, say between fifteen to twenty times a week. If within that group of songs, only one song ("Song A") out of ten had the required length of introduction for particular DJ advertising messages, that song would have a higher likelihood of being chosen by "Selector." This would likely result in the track playing twenty times, while another song ("Song B") that was supposed to receive the same airplay only gets fifteen plays. Five additional plays may not seem like a lot, but the computer has just increased the likelihood of listeners hearing "Song A" over "Song B" by 33%. Now, imagine if this scenario were replicated in twenty or thirty radio stations across the country, all owned by the same company with the same advertising goals. At that point, just by virtue of computer scheduling, "Song A" gets played 100 to 150 times more per week than "Song B," which is supposedly in the same relative sphere of popularity.

Considering the number of radio stations in the country, 100 plays may appear to be minimal. However, the programmers who decide whether these songs should play more often rely on national trade magazines such as *Billboard* and *Radio & Records* (*R&R*), which tally these spins through Broadcast Data Systems (BDS) and MediaBase. These publications and services filter out radio stations that do not fit a particular style of music to create a chart showing the relative success of certain songs in certain genres across the nation. As an example, an Alternative

Rock chart would only include airplay from stations that classify themselves as primarily playing "Alternative Rock" music. In these charts, 150 plays can mean the difference between #32 and #28. It could mean the difference between #22 and #19. Those are minor differences to consumers who often care only about the Top Ten. But to the industry, these differences can be monumental. If "Song B" is stuck at #22 because it cannot get those additional 100 plays, radio programmers across the country could likely view the record as "unsuccessful" and cease playing it. At the same time, with nothing different except "Selector" scheduling, if "Song A" moved up the chart to #19, it would be a Top Twenty record, and the industry would likely say it has "momentum." It does not matter that the momentum was largely generated by scheduling software which fills holes designed to sell incremental advertising dollars. With this "momentum," the same programmers would likely give it a bigger shot by "bumping up" its rotation and increasing the airplay to forty to fifty spins a week. At this point the process can likely repeat.

Do you find this impossible? Then witness the rise of Mariah Carey. In 2005, her success led her to tie Elvis Presley for the most *Billboard* #1 records ever by a solo artist. Something has to be going in her favor, other than her incredible vocal range, stunning good looks, and working with some of the most savvy record label executives, producers, and songwriters at both Sony and Universal. But it turns out that while this power was crucial to give her music prominence, the most important element may have been the abnormally long introductions of her #1 hits. Her timing with the "Selector" effect also allows her to hold the record for the artist with the longest average #1 introduction length in the pop era.

While many song introductions in the 1990s hovered in the sixteen to eighteen second ranges, Carey routinely had song introductions that extended beyond twenty seconds. In fact, two songs ("Dreamlover" and "Fantasy") had intros that

neared forty seconds, while "Always Be My Baby" tied for the second-longest introduction of any #1 song in the pop era. (The longest was "Papa Was a Rollin' Stone," by the Temptations, though one could argue the nearly two-minute instrumental intro was actually a true part of the song). Yes, Carey already had a lot going for her, but it was having that little trick up the sleeve that aided her #1 longevity record.

That does not mean that Mariah and her team created the songs with this manipulation of the system in mind. Most likely the idea was *not* part of the creative process. What may have occurred, though, is that someone noticed that Mariah fared better with a longer introduction. From there, consciously or subconsciously, more Mariah songs were created with extended introductions. Many successful music creators get the mechanics of a hit song either by conscious study or through absorption from experience. Yet whereas other innovations occurred with limited, focused distribution points and monitoring outlets, now the distribution is wide and monitoring is difficult at best.

PERSONAL AIRPLAY

Thus, the game begins to change. The non-zero play, which had been taken for granted and never properly quantified, now has shifted back to zero play. The iPod and other portable digital devices eliminated the guesswork that vinyl and cassettes necessitated to find the beginning of a song. The memory size in these players also eliminated the need to keep a large variety of compact discs handy to play in portable CD players. Also, the minute size of MP3 players made them infinitely more portable than similar CD players, which led to a marked increase in popularity from previous portable devices. This has given them far greater market penetration than any previous personal music device.

No matter the size, shape, or storage capacity of these portable digital players, every single play begins at zero seconds. It is currently impossible to start a song file at any

midpoint. While one could experience the same playback in all varieties of compact disc players, the crucial difference is the sheer number of songs available at one's disposal. A CD would allow listeners to skip through songs, but only songs that were physically available on that CD. This meant selection was limited and a listener could not receive musical diversity without physically changing the CD. Skipping to different songs was also restricted. With multiple CD changers, a listener could get more musical diversity through song skipping. But even on these devices, skipping was infrequent. Skipping from disc to disc was cumbersome, as it involved the listener sitting through seven to ten seconds of silence as the player manually switched discs.

On iPods, skipping is easy, and even more desired, due to the volume of music contained within the device. As people place thousands of songs on their iPods, they can only know they actually enjoy all the songs thru manual ratings or playlists based on playback information. In fact, people report "discovering" new music within their iPod, as they randomly hear tracks on albums they already have that may not have been readily familiar.

The skip button also experiences increased usage, because the volume of music available means a listener has more choices to find a suitable track, as opposed to limited options on radio or an individual CD. A listener often skips several songs until he actually arrives at a song that suits him at that particular moment. If the listener skips five songs before he arrives at the song he desires, while listening to about four seconds of each song before deciding to skip to another, the whole action would take only twenty seconds, as the skips are instantaneous. It is equally as long with a CD, but the lack of selection would make five skips unlikely. The deeper into the CD one gets, the narrower the selection. On a CD changer, the same process would take nearly a minute, or three times as long. Manually switching out CDs takes even longer than that. The ease and access to diversity

has subtly encouraged so much usage of a skip button that musicians need to create with that in mind.

Since there is so little time to ensnare the listener with access to a massive iPod library, he better be engaged immediately. This necessitates a tight and engaging introduction. In many cases, this means exploiting the catchiness of a chorus quickly. Remember that the listener had at least some awareness of the music loaded on his digital player. There is a likely chance that he has already heard the track once, presumably when the track was first obtained. If something needs to trigger a memory of that song from a previous listen, it better be done in those first four seconds. Without that, the song will remain unfamiliar, and therefore be skipped frequently.

This is fine for a personal listening experience, but personal airplay has never been tracked for the pop charts. Pop charts have been assembled by combining single sales at retail with airplay that is created by radio programmers. The chart creators, though, have always wanted the most accurate reflection of the audience's listening habit. If they could have monitored what played on home stereos, they would have. The best they could have achieved that would have been a skewed sampling ala Nielsen television ratings. The charts only tracked actual sales and radio play events because it was impossible to accurately do otherwise.

Today's technology, however, makes this tracking possible. Gracenote was one of the first companies to track this usage, and their website (http://www.gracenote.com/search/charts.php) offers a variety of Top Ten charts similar to those in music trade magazines. The key difference is that these are derived by the music people play on their computer. In most cases, when you put a CD in your computer and the song titles are "magically" displayed, the computer has actually contacted Gracenote's database, which provides the information. Gracenote then tallies this play event. The same thing occurs with music files. With tens of millions of people providing

this data weekly, how much longer will it be before it is included in a widely accepted pop chart?

Tracking streams within an accepted site like MySpace or YouTube is easy compared with tracking plays on iPods and any other portable device. How will those plays be tracked? They are not connected to a computer, and there is no WiFi functionality in most popular devices. Active portable device users, however, do sync to their computer often to place new tracks on their iPod, and take off tunes they do not listen to anymore. During this process, it is very simple to also monitor play logs, and iTunes can then provide that information to a chart source such as *Billboard*. Apple made steps in that direction in 2006, when it introduced a new version of iTunes that explicitly collected a tremendous amount of user data. While this caused a minor uproar, and Apple has stated that it uses the data in their store only and then discards it, iPod plays will only become more influential in the future through this data collection.

Another area that is resulting in extensive airplay tracking is with subscription services such as Rhapsody and Napster To Go. In these services, tracking of portable plays is explicit for a multitude of reasons. The services pay royalties to record labels based on each individual play, so they must be tracked to insure proper payments to artists and labels. The services also need to verify that the user is still paying his subscription fee, so devices must sync up at least once every thirty days to ensure that the tracks are active. Without it, the tracks cease to play. With all of this two-way communication on a portable device, a natural leap would be to include these play events in any chart. Now that subscription services are being introduced on mobile devices, their usage will become an increasingly larger portion of daily music usage.

ONLINE RADIO AND SKIP RATES

IPods, despite their deep penetration, are certainly not the only way people have changed the way they get their music. Many people are listening to online radio and watching online video. In April 2008, Edison Media Research reported that 33 million people in the U.S. utilized any number of the legal online radio sites at least once a week. In January 2008, comScore reported that 139 million people streamed online video throughout the month. Within that audience, it is estimated that more than two billion music videos are streamed across all sites every month. That number has only been growing.

At first thought, it seems that these play events should be looked at no differently than traditional music sources. With some sites, this is certainly true. AOL Radio operates under one stream, with multiple users tapping into it. This means that at the moment you "enter" the radio station, you can be placed into any portion of the song, much like turning on traditional radio. However, unlike traditional radio, switching between stations is time consuming, when you take into account the searching, selecting, and buffering of the new signal. While this first song may not be a zero play, the difficulty in switching channels will likely result in that first play being the only one that does not begin at zero seconds.

More online radio outlets actually deliver individual streams, instead of one community stream. This enables the service to create a stream of content that is personalized to the user. The personalized radio services begin all tracks as a zero play, since it is impossible to personalize a stream and at the same time make it available en masse. Many of the most popular services utilize this platform, such as Pandora, Yahoo! Music and Last.fm. These services also offer a popular feature called the skip button. This allows the user, if he is uninterested in a song, to skip ahead to the next one selected on his radio station. It operates in a very similar

fashion to the functionality on the iPod. Once again, this guarantees that the listener will get each song as a zero play. In community streams, skipping is impossible. The skip button also, by the nature of its existence, encourages the listener to utilize it extensively. This means if the user is going to be engaged by a song on those radio services, that listener needs to be engaged extremely fast. The success of these sites is only making services with a skip button more plentiful, not less.

Official monitoring of these services by BDS requires that songs play for a minimum of sixty seconds to count as a play. When people use that skip button quickly, the song will not register as an official play. Therefore, these skipped plays will not count toward chart positions, as more Internet music services begin to be counted in national charts. As radio influence diminishes in years to come and digital services gain, this skip button will increase in importance in its ability to make or break a hit. The best way that an artist can avoid the over-utilization of the skip button (aside from making good music in the first place) is to ensnare the listener for at least sixty seconds. Most listeners will hit the skip button within the first seven seconds, making that portion of the song even more crucial. Placing choruses and catchy elements of the song into those first seven seconds is about as much of a surefire approach as one can take to get to that magical sixty-second mark.

Also remember that information provided to these services is a two-way street. That skip button is effective not just at providing a better listening experience. It also gives the service that plays that song valuable data about audience enjoyment. This is something that can be called the “skip rate.” If a song is found to have a high skip rate, the service can quickly determine that it is largely unpopular with its user base. If the song is unpopular, the service has little desire to promote it further, as delivering undesired content will likely disrupt loyalty to that service. If a song has a low

skip rate, the opposite can occur, and the service may enable the track to play more and become a hit.

As its value increases in these services, and monitored similarly in on-demand audio and video sites, the skip rate can easily make or break a song. The skip rate is akin to a listener switching a radio station. Every radio program director would kill to know what songs cause the listener to press that button and go to another station. In this new paradigm, the online music outlets know which songs cause that reaction. The interesting difference is that the user never switches the station—he just switches the song. In effect, playing a bad song on radio results in a station switch and decreases loyalty. Playing a bad song on the new music services causes a *song* switch and *increases* loyalty. No wonder traditional media is in such trouble!

Traditional radio media will be able to approximate this measurement in the near future, though. The Portable People Meter (or PPM) has begun measuring radio listenership by the second in select cities. The initial uses will be to gauge overall listener tuning hours, and how effectively commercials reach their listeners. Many programmers, though, are already experimenting with utilizing this data to measure the success of specific songs and how much they should be played. It may be a few years before this data is trustworthy and used extensively, but it will have a rapid rise in determining radio programming and will underscore the need for a song to have immediate impact.

For an artist, it is not just the chart positioning and general airplay that remains important. How much the artist gets paid is also something that is dramatically impacted by this technology. Airplay from online and satellite services brings performance royalties that go back to the artist and record label. Knowing that skips occur, some labels are striking deals that allow services to not pay for songs that play only for a short period of time. Thus, potential revenues to the artist will be eliminated simply by a failure to properly engage the listener. Even without these deals, services

seeing a high skip rate may limit play, which would have the same net effect on royalty payments. As the royalties from streaming play continue to increase and become an important part of any artist's bottom line, avoiding that dreaded skip button would become a financial necessity.

While this book will offer many more tips on making a song popular, the most important is the fact that the zero play environment is the most crucial industry change of all. Most of what follows will show how to enhance the airplay and increase repeat listenership once people get past that crucial first few seconds. This attribute will be most prevalent in singles, but it will also show up in a majority of an artist's catalog. Without it, those album cuts will have far less appeal and play less often.

Make those first few seconds count. That will be your only shot.